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ABSTRACT

A study determined the levels of comprehension generated by questions accompanying the stories in new basal readers. A sample of 200 questions, 100 randomly selected from each of the 2 most widely used third-grade series (the Scott Foresman series "Celebrate Reading" and the McGraw-Hill series "A New View"), were analyzed for the number of literal and above literal-level questions. Both basal series were published in 1995. Results indicated that 71% of the questions dealt with inferential comprehension while only 12% fell into the literal category. Results were similar when questions from each series were analyzed separately. Findings suggest that previous trends of a preponderance of literal-level questions has been reversed--students answering questions that accompany the stories in the new basals engage in higher levels of comprehension rather than mere memorization. (Contains 12 references and 2 tables of data.) (RS)

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The New Basal Readers:

What Levels of Comprehension Do They Promote?

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The New Basal Readers: What Levels of Comprehension Do They Promote?

Background and Statement of the Problem

A major goal of reading instruction, according to outcomes stated at both state and local levels, is to teach students to perform higher-level comprehension tasks such as acquiring and systematically arranging information, distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information, deciding how to use data, detecting cause and effect relationships, and the like. In recent years, such sophisticated goals enhanced the notion that reading is a thinking process that cannot be taught effectively through drill and repetitive practice alone. Concerning the importance of critical reading skills, Leu and Kinzer (1992) wrote: "In reading ... the learner's major objective is to develop, refine, and use higher-level text thought processes - ultimately, to comprehend" (p. 2).

Indeed, examination of reading instructional materials reveals that higher-level comprehension is paramount among learner outcomes. Additionally, investigative commissions such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 1987) and Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, 1985) have placed heavy emphasis on critical thinking in reading.

The realization of this goal, however, is questionable given the fact that elementary students primarily receive decoding and literal comprehension opportunities with basal readers. More often than not, teachers in elementary schools follow the dictates of published reading programs that emphasize isolated skill activities targeting decoding, vocabulary, and literal comprehension (Duffy & McIntyre, 1982; Durkin, 1979; Palmer, 1982). As Samuels and Farstrup (1992) stated:

> Often the teacher's role is primarily that of a technician who follows directions and prescriptions, rather than a decision-maker who engages in substantive pedagogical maneuvering in response to students' needs. However, drill and practice instructional models are inadequate for the new comprehension curriculum. This is especially true in a technological society - a society that will increasingly value workers who can solve problems over those who can follow prescribed routines. It is no longer good enough to have

> students answer literal questions and memorize isolated skill responses. (pp. 171-172)

It is well established in the literature that elementary teachers rely heavily on basal readers and the accompanying lesson plans for reading instruction. Although implementation differs among teachers, research demonstrates that published programs greatly affect classroom practices (Diederich, 1973; Durkin, 1984). The heavy reliance on basals would not pose a problem with reading instruction if they contained effective lessons that promoted higher-level comprehension. Unfortunately, published reading programs have remained virtually unchanged since the 1940s. While the graphics and attractive packaging have improved since the early days, basals still overemphasize decoding and literal level comprehension at the expense of higher-level comprehension. The most traditional lessons employ the Directed-Reading Activity (DRA) format, which is skill-driven. Specifically, the objective of each lesson is to learn an isolated skill (which may or may not be relevant to understanding the story) rather than to comprehend a particular type of discourse. While students are held accountable for learning the skill through independent workbook practice and/or end-of-unit tests, they are seldom held accountable for the comprehension of the reading selection -- except through questioning. Moreover, the literature indicates that these questions evoke recall of story details and that teachers tend to rely on these questions during the teaching of basal lessons (Winograd, Wixson, & Lipson, 1989).

In the mid-1990s, a dramatic shift occurred among most major publishing companies who for so many years had emphasized a skills framework. This shift can be attributed to many factors. The continued decline in higher-level reading skills and achievement in the United States (Flanagan, 1976; NAEP, 1985) accompanied by the increased interest in whole language prompted elementary teachers to search for commercially-prepared materials that incorporated strategies such as: shared reading; guided reading; language experience; process writing; read-aloud; thematic teaching; and the like. These strategies emphasize meaning instead of isolated drill of the

lower-level components of reading and initiate the teaching act with focus on the entire story. The excitement among teachers created by these and other comprehension-based techniques prompted basal publishers to analyze products, which had not changed in decades, and modify their total philosophy in an effort to match the demands of the market. In short, the overcrowded textbook publishing market underwent a metamorphosis unparalleled in reading basal history. In the new basals of 1994-1995, whole language methods permeate lesson plans and encourage teachers to utilize the reading-writing connection, think-alouds, read-alouds, thematic units, and most importantly - children's literature. Moreover, publisher representatives now portray potential adopted texts as tools of whole language while making the decree: "We listened to teachers and responded to what they wanted." The amount of ancillary materials that accompany the new basals nearly doubled and included: big books, chapter books, journal notebooks, interactive videodiscs, and so forth. This move surprised a potential market that once relied on basals with diluted vocabulary and predictable workbook drills.

At first exposure, these materials impressed teachers who desired more focus on meaning and real-reading experiences. Excerpts of authentic stories in the children's literature "anthology" (the new term for basal) included original portions of such notable classics as Charlotte's Web. While new strategies and materials do exist among the new basals, one component remains unchanged: the preponderance of questions interspersed throughout the basal story. Moreover, research in the area of questioning indicates that teachers rely heavily on story-related questions included in the lesson plans that accompany the basal (Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1991) and historically these questions tend to emphasize literal or recall-only comprehension. Reading publishers proudly proclaim a renewed emphasis on meaning-centered instruction, yet teachers must ask: Have the new basals changed their approach to questioning and become sensitive to the critical comprehension movement?

Analyzing New Basal Readers

In an effort to determine the levels of comprehension generated by questions accompanying the stories in new basal readers, an analysis of the questions was completed. The research examined the extent to which the story-related questions emphasized higher-level comprehension. Further, this study sought to examine if a statistically significant difference existed between the number of literal and above-literal-level questions (i.e., inferential and evaluation). It was hypothesized that there would be no significant difference between the frequencies of story-related questions classified at the literal level and the above-literal-level of comprehension (i.e., inferential and evaluation combined).

Research Procedures

Guided reading stories that accompany the new basal readers for grade 3 were obtained for the actual classification study. The sample consisted of 200 questions, 100 randomly selected from each of the two most widely used third-grade series from Alabama and Texas combined. Data from both state departments revealed that the Scott Foresman (1995) series entitled: "Celebrate Reading" and the /McGraw-Hill (1995) series entitled: "A New View" were the most widely adopted series in the two states combined as of Spring 1996. The 200 questions were randomly selected prior to the classification and extracted from all interrater reliability exercises and training discussions.

After extensive training in question classification with the levels of literal, inferential, and evaluative comprehension and obtaining an interrater agreement of .96 on a sample of questions not selected for the actual classification study, three raters independently classified 200 questions, 100 from each series according to three comprehension categories: literal, inferential, and evaluation.

Findings and Conclusions

To represent the data, answer the research question, and test the proposed hypothesis, the study utilized frequency distribution tables and the chi-square goodness-of-fit analysis. The chi-square goodness of fit analysis determined if the observed frequency differed from that expected by chance.

The research question asked: What levels of questions are promoted by questions that accompany both basal series for guided reading? In order to answer this research question, the following null hypothesis was tested: There is no significant difference between the frequencies of questions classified at the literal-level and above-literal-level.

Each question randomly selected for classification was rated independently by three trained raters. The results of the ratings were compared and the question was placed in the category ascribed by the majority of raters. In the actual classification study, the raters reached total agreement on 93% of the questions. Table 1 reports the frequency distribution of the results of the classification for both series combined.

Table 1

FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF STORY-RELATED QUESTIONS FOR THE SCOTT, FORESMAN AND MACMILLAN/MCGRAW-HILL SERIES COMBINED ACCORDING TO THE LEVELS OF COMPREHENSION

Comprehension Level	**n**	%
Literal	25	12
Inferential	142	71
Evaluative	33	17
	200	100

Note. *Percentages are rounded to nearest whole numbers.*

Inspection of these data indicate that the majority of story-related comprehension questions that accompany the selected basal series were classified in the inferential category. The overall frequency and percentage tabulation reveals that of all 200 questions randomly selected for analysis, 142 (71%) dealt with inferential comprehension. The second largest percentage of questions was classified as evaluation, 33 (17%); only 25 (12%) fell into the literal category.

Although these data represent a combination of both series, comparisons between the two selected series yield significant similarities that should be noted. When analyzed separately, the two series yield remarkably similar results that highlight a dramatic change in the new basals. The Macmillan/McGraw-Hill (1995) series contained 71 inferential comprehension and 16 evaluation items for a total of 87% above-literal comprehension questions. It is significant to note that only 13% of the comprehension questions emphasize literal recall. These data are represented in Table 2.

Table 2

INDIVIDUAL FREQUENCY AND PERCENTAGE OF BOTH TEXTBOOKS' EMPHASIS ON LEVELS OF COMPREHENSION

Basal Reading Series	**Literal**		**Inferential**		**Evaluation**		**Total**
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Macmillan/McGraw-Hill	13	(13)	71	(71)	16	(16)	100
Scott, Foresman	12	(12)	71	(71)	17	(17)	100

Note. *Percentages are rounded to nearest whole numbers.*

The Scott, Foresman (1995) series demonstrated a near perfect replication with respect to the three comprehension categories. An analysis of these data in the above-literal-categories indicate that 71 questions were judged as inferential and 17 items were judged as evaluation resulting in a total of 88% above-knowledge-level

questions for this series. Only 12% of the questions that accompany the story were categorized as literal.

Of major note is the finding that two of the most widely-used reading series (grade 3) from Texas and Alabama produced a uniform emphasis on the higher-levels of comprehension: inferential and evaluation. Obviously, the selected basals promote inferencing and evaluation rather than a preponderance of literal-level comprehension questions.

To test the null-hypothesis, a chi-square goodness-of-fit analysis was conducted to determine if the observed differences between the total frequencies of the combined textbooks' comprehension questioning (literal vs. above-literal-level) departed significantly from those expected by chance. Because the chi-square value of 32.23 exceeds the critical chi-square value beyond the .001 level, the null hypothesis is rejected. This statistic indicates that the distribution of total frequencies for the literal and above-literal-level comprehension questions departed significantly from a distribution based on chance alone. Therefore, the selected basals include significantly more above-literal-level comprehension questions (i.e., inferential and evaluation).

Implications

It should be noted that the new basals consist of three main parts related to the guided-reading plan for each story: (a) Building Background Knowledge and Motivation, (b) Guided Reading of the Story, and (c) Story Extension. This research investigated comprehension questions included in teacher's editions for use before, during, and after reading. Questions conceived for use in story-extension were not analyzed.

Additionally, a significant change has occurred in the publishing industry. Regarding reading basals... the number of series available for adoption as a core basal has diminished significantly due to such factors as the consolidation of companies or

the company discontinuing publication in the area of reading. This research selected for study two of the five most widely used basals available for adoption in the United States and, most importantly, selected for study two of the most widely used basals for the states of Alabama and Texas combined. In short, the sample used in this study is highly representative of the basals available for adoption and used in today's classrooms.

This study reveals an exciting and surprising shift in the comprehension emphasis contained in the new basals. Not so long ago, these same publishers included a preponderance of literal-level questions related to the story. Today, the trend has reversed dramatically, and these data show that the new basals include not only meaning-centered teaching strategies, but they now include meaning-centered questioning that correlate with such methods.

Research verifies that the type of question used by teachers strongly affects what children learn to think about while reading. If literal details receive the emphasis in a teacher's questioning, then children learn to attend to details as they read (Anderson, 1985). Therefore, repeatedly asking the same type of question cues students to focus on details needed to answer the question, and they locate their attention accordingly. On the other hand, studies (e.g., Pearson, 1985) show that making inferences and evaluations result in improvement in critical thinking without loss, and even a gain, in higher-level comprehension because active manipulation of literal events enhances retention; students must integrate literal details and integrate them into their world or little comprehension occurs.

Data in this study imply that students, while answering the questions that accompany the story in the new basals, engage in higher-levels of comprehension rather than mere memorization. Further, these data indicate that the new reading basals do in fact include opportunities for students to experience higher-levels of comprehension before, during, and after story reading.

For years publishers and the on-site representatives have made lofty claims regarding critical reading only for teachers and students to discover that few

experiences beyond the literal-level exist. The new basals, for the first time, validate such claims with a renewed emphasis on inferencing and evaluation.

While it is hoped that no teacher will rely exclusively on a single material (i.e., the new basal) to meet the complex needs of today's elementary students, novice teachers and those who do use a basal exclusively should find these results encouraging. These results should prompt teachers to examine closely each lesson plan and identify such questions. Most importantly, teachers must use higher-level-questions (as well as literal-level questions) to provide students with the opportunity to infer and evaluate. With the new basals, this opportunity exists for the first time in recent memory.

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